

Chapter 15

Boas Goes to Americas: The Emergence of Transamerican Perspectives on ‘Culture’

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No society is isolated but exists in more or less intimate
relations to its neighbors.
(Boas, *Anthropology and Modern Life* 211)

It would be exceedingly difficult to say at the present
time what race is pure and what race is mixed.
(Boas, *Race, Language, and Culture* 18)

This chapter addresses the remarkable synergy between the emergence of a new intellectual wave in the Americas after the 1920s favorable to ethnic miscegenation as central features of national identities, and the paralleled production of founding anthropologist Franz Boas (1858–1942) on defining culture in new terms better capturing the dynamics of change he saw fundamental to the societies of the New world. It assesses the influence of Boasian views on redefining culture and race on new bases closer to the pluralistic experience of Latin American societies, through an examination of the work of Manuel Gamio (Mexico), Gilberto Freyre (Brazil), and Fernando Ortiz (Cuba). Gamio and Freyre were both trained by Franz Boas, and allegedly adapted Boasianism to their analysis of national culture, while newly favoring *mestizaje* or fusion (over eurocentric racialism until then mostly prevailing). Ortiz for his part has proposed in the forties ‘transculturation’ as a theory countervailing that of aculturation for explaining cultural change in heterogenous societies, a perspective highly resonant with Boasian, Gamian or Freyrian views about culture, and firmly part of an intellectual wave forming since the 1920s.¹

¹ I would like to thank Xavier Saint-Denis and Mélissa Gélinas for their assistance in conducting research for the preparation of this chapter. Previous versions of this chapter have been presented at seminars of the Group of Interdisciplinary Research on

Founding anthropologist Franz Boas (1858–1942) is most often credited with disqualifying scientific racism, based on the redefinition of ‘culture’ away from ‘race’ in a perspective vividly contrasting to those of his times. With Boas, anthropology came to establish itself as a discipline concerned with the study of people’s cultures, viewed not as some fixed attributes biologically inherited to characterize one ‘community’ or ‘tribe’ or another, but as changing social practice to be understood in historical context, with its own terms and value, and which had little to do with phenotypical or psychological attributions drawn for all. Through his work and involvement as a public intellectual, Boas also positioned anthropology as a committed discipline that could not ignore its policy uses or misuses.

While indeed much is known among specialists about the lasting influence of Boas on the emergence of North American anthropology with the establishment of one of the very first departments in this field at Columbia University after 1896, less has been said on the international diffusion of this influence beyond North America. Interestingly, while Boas contributed greatly in turning anthropology’s gaze to the study of people, such as indigenous, afro-descendant and immigrant populations, he was not doing so in complete isolation from what was being done elsewhere in the continent, nor was his work ignored by a generation of intellectuals working across Latin America on issues of racial and cultural diversity as fundamentally characteristic to Latin American societies and projected national identities. The work of Manuel Gamio (1883–1960) or José Vasconcelos (1882–1952) in Mexico, of Fernando Ortiz (1881–1969) in Cuba, as well as those of Arthur Ramos (1903–1949) or Gilberto Freyre (1900–1987) in Brazil, all stressed, with a newly optimistic view and contrasting with previously prevailing perspectives in the continent, the centrality of *mestizaje* (or interethnic mixedness) for defining the dynamic identity of their societies. They also joined voices for defending a view of ‘culture’ that opposed the scientific racist perspectives of many of their contemporaries. Some of these scholars studied and worked with Franz Boas, himself, or with one of his students. Most of them were between their twenties and late thirties when Boas was at the peak of his academic career and influence in the 1920s, having founded what many after him would call a ‘boasian approach’ to the study of culture.

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Processes of definitive influence cannot be established definitively to detect where ideas come from or what their trajectory may be, yet, one can notice the remarkable synergy between the emergence of a new intellectual wave in the continent after the 1920s favorable to ethnic miscegenation as central features of national identities, in the Latin American context, and the paralleled production of Franz Boas on defining culture in new terms to better capture the dynamics of change he saw fundamental to the societies of the New world. In what follows I want to discuss the legacy of Boas by addressing the main elements of this ‘approach’ to culture, such as his perspective on race and ethnic mixing, in order to underline some of the conceptual coincidences to be found in the work of Latin American anthropologists and intellectual contemporaries of his time. I will more particularly look at the work of Manuel Gamio, Fernando Ortiz and Gilberto Freyre.

The Intellectual Context

Born and schooled in Germany, Boas came to the United States in 1886, wishing to distance himself from a fin de siècle European climate marked with anti-Semitism and rising nationalism, while establishing himself in a continent not itself exempt from racism with indigenous and black populations, as well as the massive influx of south European immigrants which arrived between the mid-1890s and the First World War (1914).² As was the case with the intellectual climate in the rest of the continent, U.S. academia was inclined towards the inter-related perspectives of European evolutionism, social Darwinism, and scientific racism derived from the work of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744–1829),³ Arthur de

² According to Simon, between 50 and 60 million immigrants of European origins embarked for the new world between 1815 and 1914. More than half of this number came to the United States, which was receiving around 20,000 entries around 1820, 300,000 around 1850, and up to 1 to 1.4 million entries between 1900 and 1914. Other leading receiving countries in the continent include Brazil and Argentina. Overall, between 1840 and 1914, the U.S. received more than 30 million new immigrants, 90 percent of which were of European origins (according to National Census Bureau data used by Chesnais 1999).

³ Although placed here because of the influence of his work in the evolutionary models, Lamarck is not to be confused with social Darwinism or theories of natural selection which state that stronger organisms have better chances to survive than weaker, and when transposed to races, that the white race ranks first in the evolutionary scale. He is, however, included here because he preceded evolutionism by offering a theory of complexifying evolution which had great resonance in the debates between racial purism and mixedness in the hemispheric context, particularly in Latin America. For Lamarck, living organisms showed a tendency to complexify through their evolution, and their new acquired aptitudes were transmitted to the next generation, which was as well to complexify further and transmit again its gained aptitudes to the next.

Gobineau (1816–1882), Charles Darwin (1809–1882), and Herbert Spencer (1820–1903). This way of thinking essentially divided human collectivities into ‘races’ defined by skin color and phenotypical traits along an evolutionary spectrum of less to most advanced types and in which the white race of Northwestern European ancestry tended to score first. In the context of societies where ethnic composition was rapidly changing due to immigration and inter-racial mixing, debates over the need to protect the purity of white blood and prevent the rise of mixed types which were by many held a form of social degeneracy, were raging. At the same time, in a continent where mixed races and darker skin colors were demographically predominant, theories favoring white supremacy or ethnic national homogeneity, did not always fit the reality or at least go unchallenged.

Franz Boas on ‘Culture’

In this context, Boas’s main battle was against evolutionism and its tendency to portray culture as stages of development from savage to barbarian to civilized: “the evolutionary point of view presupposes that the course of historical changes in the cultural life of mankind follows definite laws which are applicable everywhere, and which conclude that cultural developments is, in its main lines, the same among all races and people” (*Race, Language, and Culture* 281). In an era where cultural material artefacts from all over the world were collected and exhibited in museums based on a logic of technological evolution through history, from the simple to the complex and the artisanal to the industrial, he sought to convince his peers at the Anthropological Society of Washington and the Bureau of American Ethnology at the Smithsonian, with which he was closely associated, of the futility of such classifications.⁴ He proposed instead to arrange exhibits by cultural groupings where material artefacts belonging to one tribe or collectivity be presented in their reconstituted environment as well as their historical and ethnological context. The idea was radical, for it challenged the idea of viewing culture as something occurring in progressive stages ranging from savage to civilized using a sort of universal scale in which each group or collectivity was positioned, as evolutionism argued. It proposed instead to view cultures in the plural as ‘complex wholes’ which were to be understood in their own terms by fine knowledge of people’s habits, language, myths, material productions and

⁴ On arranging exhibits based on the evolutionary technology model and Franz Boas’s disputes with Otis T. Mason (1883–1908), president of the Anthropological Society of Washington and John W. Powell (1834–1902), director of the Bureau of American Ethnology at the Smithsonian Institutions, cf. the comments offered by Baker; Bunzl; Elliott; or Godoy. On Boas’s continuous disputes with the Bureau of American Ethnology under William Holmes directorship (1902–1909), cf. more particularly Godoy.

ways of life.⁵ Boas reportedly insisted that “we have to study each ethnological specimen in its history and its medium” (Elliott 4).

Yet this idea was certainly not invented by Boas who rather simply transferred from academia to museums and beyond what had been first proposed by E.B. Tylor (1832–1917) in *Primitive Culture*, published in 1871, and while Boas disagreed with Tylor’s evolutionary view of culture, he did not entirely reject his definition of culture as a “complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor 1). Boas’s first contribution was to turn part of evolutionism on its head by using the very same definition of culture, but in a non-universalist direction: the culture he was documenting was not a single, universal culture in which all people were to be scaled (as low or high-cultured, as backward or advanced, as savage or civilized), but plural, diverse cultures which often were inter-connected in specific geographic areas (‘culture areas’ or geographical zones of cultural interactions),⁶ and sometimes were not particularly connected unless historical evidence proved the contrary. To sum up, Boas’s very first contribution was to argue that culture needed to be used in its plural sense, and by doing so, eliminate evolutionary models for anthropology.

Stemming from this, a second major contribution is Boas’s heightened attention to the connectedness of cultures, which although seen as those ‘complex wholes’ described by E.B. Tylor, were not seen as separate or bounded spheres which were developing in isolation from one another. Ira Bashkow particularly draws attention to this aspect while explaining Boas’s version of diffusionism: “Against the evolutionist idea that each culture’s development is driven by universal, autonomous processes of change, Boas and his students argued that

⁵ Boasian view on cultures as ‘complex wholes’ led some authors such as George Stocking (1968; 1996), one of the leading experts on Boas to argue with others (such as Bunzl or Denby) to believe that he shared Herder’s ideas on folk cultures as integrated shared understandings where the ‘volk spirit’ formed the ‘most natural basis of political association’ (as stated by Spencer 1996 explaining Herder’s view on the organic unity of nations based on homogeneous ethnic and linguistic traits). While one cannot with absolute certainty claim that Boas was or was not influenced by his readings from Herder (being trained in a European university, he certainly did read his classics, including counter-enlightenment work), nowhere in Boas’s writing is to be found any positive mention of nationalism or about the relation between forming a (culturally) ‘integrated totality’ and a nation (in both the ethnic and the civic terms). For a view disagreeing with Boas’s alleged herderianism and placing instead the focus on his diffusionist (and internationalist) view of cultural dynamics, cf. several authors such as Bashkow; Evans; or Hegeman.

⁶ As reported by Bashkow, Edward Sapir, one of Boas’s students, developed the notion of culture areas as ‘assemblage of people who understand each other’s culture and feel themselves as a unity,’ a ‘commonality to feeling which transcends local and political difference,’ or a ‘commonality of understanding.’

cultural development is contingent on the history of a people's interactions with their neighbours" (445). That aspect is also highlighted by Evans, who claims that for Boas, cultures were complex interwoven entities that anthropologists needed to unravel, but also that diffusion was more central to him than even the term 'culture' (15). Boas was hence more attentive to the dynamics of change, borrowings and exchanges characterizing cultures. The study of such dynamics, in turn, largely justified Boas's predilection for detailed, in-depth fieldwork, with the groups studied. In this way, and against many of his contemporaries who explained causes of given cultural manifestations as stable products of evolutionary laws or as being determined by biology, geography, or economics, Boas advanced highly contextualized interpretations shunning all forms of determinism, and stressed instead the need to replace in historical perspective the cultures under study, and to be cautious in the attribution of causalities while studying the environment⁷ as well as document the multiple threads woven with other collectivities, in which each culture was to be understood. In this spirit stressing change as well as connectivity, he wrote in "The Methods of Ethnology" (originally published in the *American Anthropologist* in 1920 and subsequently in *Race, Language, and Culture* 1940): "the method which we try to develop is based on a study of the dynamic change in society that may be observed at the present time" (*Race, Language, and Culture* 285); and furthermore: "each cultural group has its own unique history, depending partly upon the peculiar inner development in the social group, and partly upon the foreign influences to which it has been subjected" (286). To sum up, Boas's second major contribution was to drive attention away from biological or environmental determinisms and towards the historical context in which cultures' interconnectedness and changeability were to be understood.

Race and Mixed Races in Boasian Perspective

As suggested in the previous section, Boas's major contributions to redefining the concept of culture away from evolutionary and determinist views, dominant views of his time, led to the emergence of a perspective stressing the plurality of cultures, their relativity (or the need to understand them in their own terms), as well as the need to capture the historical context in which they change. Such a move towards defining culture was of great importance to the dissociation of culture and race, two concepts which in Boas's view were being erroneously held

⁷ In "The Aims of Anthropological Research" reprinted in Boas's *Race, Language, and Culture*, he writes: "Environment has a certain limited effect upon the culture of man, but I do not see how the view that it is the primary moulder of culture can be supported by any facts. A hasty review of the tribes and peoples of our globe shows that people most diverse in culture and language live under the same geographical conditions" (278).

as close equivalents in prevailing discourses plagued with scientific racism: “It does not matter from which point of view we consider culture,” he writes in *Anthropology and the Modern Life*, “its forms are not dependent upon race” (60).

Culture for Boas was that complex whole of social practices to be understood in its specific context (or ‘environment,’ meaning historical, geographical, economic conditions), and race, something else which he did not always find to be a useful concept. In his perspective, race was nothing more than phenotypic types or attributes which tended to be shared among individuals of more or less common ancestry; it had nothing to do with people’s aptitudes or faculties. Nor did Boas believe in the determined heredity of such attributes and aptitudes, or in the idea that some phenotypic attributes (form of nose, lips, head, skin color, or head form) were characteristics of either advanced or backward races. It is useful to recall that in Boas’s time, scientific discourse on the biological source of cultural differences between peoples of differing racial background were given a lot of academic attention and popular media coverage, allowing scientists to publish their conclusions similar to that of neuro-anthropologist Robert Bean:

The Caucasian and the Negro are fundamentally opposite extremes in evolution. Having demonstrated that the Negro and the Caucasian are widely different in characteristics, due to a deficiency of gray matter and connecting fibers in the Negro brain ... We are forced to conclude that it is [sic] useless to try to elevate the Negro by education or otherwise except in the direction of his natural endowment. (qtd in Baker 210)

Boas was opposed to that kind of pseudo-science because other than perpetuating a racism that justified white race privileges over any colored races and legitimizing systemic racial segregation, he saw no scientific basis on which to grant those views any credit. For him, the size of brains did not invariably indicate intelligence, and whether lips, nose, type of hair, and skin color indicated signs of primitivism or not were useless questions to investigate.⁸ Instead of speaking of races in a generalized view and establishing grand phenotypic, psychological or biological types, he simply preferred to prioritize individuals, which shared some features generally attributed to one or the other racial type, but which as well varied immensely from one to another within the same supposedly similar racial type (“The Problem of Race,” in Boas’s *Anthropology and Modern Life* 18–62).⁹ He also showed, in a large-scale study of 18,000 immigrants and American-born

⁸ On that aspect one can read “The Problem of Race” by Boas (*Anthropology and Modern Life* 18–62).

⁹ Taking the case of southern and eastern Europeans whose immigration to the U.S. was since the mid-nineteenth Century was not always positively viewed, Boas observes that “in every single nationality of Europe the various elements of the continental population are represented. Proof that a selected type within a nationality is the carrier of definitive mental and cultural traits has never been given” (*Anthropology and Modern Life* 88).

children of immigrants conducted in 1918–1920 for the US Immigration Commission (“Changes in Bodily Forms of Descendants of Immigrants,” a study reprinted in *Race, Language, and Culture*), that phenotypic traits did not invariably transmit from one generation to the other and that more often than not, immigrants’ child showed distinctive results indicating the changing influence of socio-economic conditions on bodily attributes (Boas used the term ‘plasticity’ of bodily adaptation to environment). While showing that racial attributes were not stable from one individual to another nor across generations, Boas and boasianism after him vividly opposed any form of racialism¹⁰ which allowed to consider any phenotypic type, or culture for that matter, as superior to another.¹¹

In addition to such a liberal commitment to equality, Boas’s version of diffusionism and attention to the dynamics of human migrations did not allow him to view racial purity as a constitutive feature of most individuals or societies, as was somehow claimed by some of his most vocal contemporaries such as the previously cited Robert Bean in the *Negro Brain* (1906), or the influential Maddison Grant in *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916).¹² Boas criticised the

¹⁰ If racism is generally considered a view about inferiorizing racial types or considering one type superior to others, racialism for its part could be defined as a more general view that divides mankind into separate races to which certain attributes and aptitudes are said to be linked.

¹¹ Some consider that this commitment led Boas to be favorably considered by African-American leaders of the ‘Harlem Renaissance.’ Boas connection to the historian, essayist and activist W.E.B. Du Bois and the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP, founded in 1909) is not however fully documented, some authors such as George Stocking argue for the rather close friendship between Boas and Dubois, while others suggest a respectful if not lukewarm distance between them. It is mostly known that Boas agreed to give an address at Du Bois’ home institution, Atlanta University, in 1907, in which he made an enduring impression on his hosts by “incensing” African heritage and civilization, and was as well re-invited to deliver opening addresses in the annual meetings of the NAACP in 1909 and 1910.

¹² Maddison Grant (1865–1937) was an influential lawyer and physical anthropologist primarily claiming in *The Passing of the Great Race* that civilization was one of the great achievements of the ‘Nordic’ race (for example Northwestern European) which was in his view threatened with the ‘invasion’ of other-than Nordic stocks, with the rapidly changing composition of U.S. society with immigration inflows. The work of Grant is said to have been highly influential in the U.S.A. and in Germany in the 20s and 30s, preceding a racial hygiene movement which was to become more fully known with the rise of National Socialism in the 30s (which replaced ‘Nordic’ with ‘Aryan’). Grant is also said to have been actively involved in the drafting of the U.S. Immigration Act of 1924, restricting East and Southern European immigration to the U.S. as well as strengthening prohibitions against Black and Asian inflows, measures which would be reversed decades later, in the mid-60s.

argument that hybrid races were decreasing in fertility, showing mental or physical deterioration, or altering in any way the aptitudes or faculties allegedly associated with the 'white' race. Moreover, he even doubted the idea that racial purity even existed in national settings: "As a matter of fact," he wrote in 1915 "it would be exceedingly difficult to say at present time what race is pure and what race is mixed" (from the address "Modern Populations of America" given at the annual meeting of the International Congress of Americanists in Washington, 1915, reprinted in *Race, Language, and Culture* 19). By this he meant that although certain racial types could be broadly established, few populations, and even fewer national societies of the old and the new world were racially homogenous: "'In short,' he adds 'the whole history of Europe is one of continued series of shifts of population, that must have resulted in an enormous mixture of all the different types of the continent'" (26). The observation held for the case of the Americas. For Boas, if there were three broad types of population in the New world, these types were highly mixed within and between themselves, with one type corresponding to descendants of Europeans (themselves of mixed types, Spaniards being for instance descendants of successive overlaid of Phoenicians, Romans, Celts, Teutonic tribes, and Moorish people), Indian blood (many of which were mixed among themselves and with others, particularly in the central and southern cone of the continent), and 'Negro mixtures and other races' (the Afro-American population of the U.S.A. and the rest of the continent having originally been forcibly taken from diverse locations and tribes across Africa). Hence on race and racial purity, Boas went against the grain of most of his North American contemporaries, consistently countering views claiming the superiority of certain races over others, as well as challenging the idea that any race could be proven to be pure, and by extension, that any given nationality could be racially labelled.¹³

¹³ Boas's personal relation with philosopher Horace M. Kallen (1882–1974) or journalist and social critic Randolph Bourne (1886–1918), respectively defending in 'Democracy versus the Melting Pot' (1915, *The Nation*) and 'Trans-national America' (1916, *Atlantic Monthly*) highly pluralistic perspectives arguing for the right to cultural difference in a cosmopolitan America, is not extensively documented by specialists. It is however noticeable that they respectively shared Boasian egalitarianism view of races and cultures, as well as the emphasis on defining culture away from evolutionary models and towards pluralistic lenses. Both Kallen and Bourne are often cited in the literature on multiculturalism as having offered pioneering reflections for what would become a policy model soon to emerge in the U.S. (in its melting pot version) and Canada (in its pluralistic, non-assimilationist version) after the decade of the Civil rights movement (1955-1968) towards the late sixties. Both articles are available on the World Wide Web at:

<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/ows/seminarsflvs/Kallen.pdf>.

<http://historymuse.net/readings/BourneTransnationalAmerica.html>.

Back to the Americas: Fusion, Hybridity, and Transculturation

After the 1910s, and during the peak of his influence in the U.S., which is said to range from the 1910s to the 1930s, Boas's ideas on race and culture paralleled similar developments throughout Latin American academia. Comparable to the U.S. in the nineteenth century up to the first world war, many Latin American countries were dealing with heightened immigration flows mostly from Europe and Southeast Asia (the 'coolies trade'), and most were as well made of varying degrees of ethnically heterogeneous populations from European, Indigenous, Black and more recent Asian ancestries. More importantly, many were well immersed in the very same intellectual climate of prevailing scientific racism and evolutionism Boas was challenging, a climate which confronted many Latin American societies since the mid-90s, and lead several among them to opt for favorably considering inter-racial mixing (or 'mestizaje') over a white racialism that did not always fit with their realities.¹⁴ Boas's perspectives on race and culture, in turn, seemed to fit much better. Let us in what follows interrogate the concepts of indigenismo, mestizaje and transculturation, key to the 'mestizofilia' movement in the hemisphere, as they were developed in the first half of the twentieth century by anthropologists Manuel Gamio in Mexico, essayist Gilberto Freyre in Brazil and anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in Cuba, via the eventual relationship of these authors with Boas.

Of all three highly influential Latin-American intellectuals, Manuel Gamio is distinguished as the one who has most directly worked and studied with Franz Boas at Columbia University, obtaining his Master's degree in Anthropology under his supervision in 1909–1911, and a doctorate ten years later. Together with Boas he established an *International School of American Anthropology* in Mexico City in 1910, which he headed shortly before the school was dismantled in 1914 in the midst of the political turmoil of the Mexican revolution (1910–1920).¹⁵ In the

¹⁴ More specifically for the case of Mexico, Swarthout writes: "Social acceptance of mestizaje during the latter half of the XIXst Century became part of Mexico's coping strategy in response to the damaging influence of European positivist social thought that attempted to scientifically classify populations into inferior (darker) and superior (lighter) races. Mexico and other Latin American countries could not strictly adhere to European racial theories, because darker-skinned indigenous and mixed-races groups formed the overwhelming majority of their populations. Thus, the 'científicos' reinvented mestizaje as a constructive phenomenon" (61).

¹⁵ The short-lived school crystallized to a certain point Boas's interest in taking up fieldwork throughout Latin America, out of conviction that "new world cultures represented as much an inner unity as that of the old world" or that the logic continuation of a diffusionist research strategy was to extend his knowledge of North American Indian societies to the continent (Godoy 230). However, in Mexico, the times were not favorable to foreign sponsorship or foreign-led anthropological fieldwork among indigenous communities.

subsequent years of his involvement with Boas, Gamio rapidly positioned himself as a professional applied anthropologist who, for one part, convinced the establishment of the contribution that anthropologists could bring to the formulation of national policies, and for the other, raised indigenismo to the rank of official government policy, in an era of strong nationalism celebrating racial mixedness (or ‘mestizaje’) as the uniting symbol of the nation.¹⁶

For Gamio, indigenismo was a perspective allowing to reconcile the mestizaje valorized under post-revolutionary Mexico (as elsewhere in Latin America in the same epoch),¹⁷ with his own preoccupations about the ‘Indian problem’ in the forging of the Mexican nation. Indigenismo was about simultaneously highlighting indigenous past splendors as Mexico’s profound identity, and seeking state interventions for linguistic unification and bringing actual indigenous communities to a modernizing Mexico. As long as indigenous people remained isolated, the country would remain divided between a majority of ‘backward communities’ and a minority forming an ‘advanced and efficient civilization’ (qtd in Brading), a division preventing the country from moving toward its mestizo future. Yet interestingly, when addressing the problem of indigenous situation in the country, Gamio never referred to anything having to do with racial characteristics, bio-psychological attributes or lack of aptitudes, or any form of explanatory determinism: “The Indian,” he wrote in *Forjando Patria*, “has the same aptitudes for progress as the white, he is neither inferior nor superior” (39). Based on this premise, he used a mostly boasian approach to race and culture, which he adapted to his own highly nationalistic model.¹⁸ In effect, while

¹⁶ The mestizofilia of Mexican muralist movement in the twenties (Diego Riveira, José Clemente Orozco, David Siqueiros) and of state officials or intellectuals Andrés Molina Enriquez (1885–1940) and José Vasconcelos (1882–1959) is for many mexicanists highly related to the country’s own nation-building climate during revolutionary years, willingly breaking with the European esthetics preferred under the porfiriato. The literature is abundant on the country’s artistic, intellectual, and political climate during the first half of the twentieth century, but excellent accounts are provided by Gonzalez; Knight; or Swarthout.

¹⁷ There is an impressive literature on the emergence of what some have called ‘mestizofilia,’ ‘the ideology of mestizaje’ or more neutrally ‘mestizaje’ throughout Latin America mostly in the 20s, but, cf. Wade; Martinez-Echazabal; Swarthout; Vasconcelos, and for the Mexican case more particularly, cf. the ironies of anthropologist and sociologist Roger Bartra (1987) giving a good introduction to his writing.

¹⁸ There are debates in the literature over whether Manuel Gamio was or was not a boasian. Leading expert on Boas George Stocking, supported by Sitton and Weaver (1990) or Ramon E. Ruiz (1992) consistently advocates in his entire work that he was, while others such as Castaneda (2003) or Walsch (2004) claim he was not. I mostly ponder the possibility that intellectuals can have several conflicting influences at the same time, and do not necessarily have to entirely adhere to one or other inspiring

he sometimes used the language of evolutionism when considering current indigenous culture to be in a state of backwardness in relation to Mexican mestizos' culture (sometimes using the terms 'stages of evolution' or 'evolutionary development' to qualify indigenous Mexicans, as quoted in Brading (85) and highlighted by Walsch or Castaneda), he simultaneously placed great emphasis on the possibility of getting rid of such backwardness while valorizing the country's indigenous past achievements, hence pleading in a rather boasian perspective for a relativist view of culture that gave equal scores to indigenous legacies and aptitudes. Gamio also saw that in order to induce (state-led) change, indigenous communities' isolation needed to be broken, and connections to the nation fostered. In the same vein, race was not considered a determining factor for explaining cultural practices: he instead adhered to the boasian view of the influence of environmental factors such as geographic isolation, ill-education, economic oppression, or foreign-induced beliefs such as Catholicism.¹⁹ And finally, he was less preoccupied with discussing matters of racial purity than supporting the mixedness he saw fundamental to nation-building, and through that, the assimilation of indigenous groups to a literally constructed mexicanness made of cultural fusion.²⁰

Such insistence on the forging of nationhood, a concern mostly foreign to Boas, was also shared by other prolific Latin American intellectuals such as Gilberto Freyre in Brazil, who in his project of defining brasilianness as profoundly hybrid, was among the very first essayists to have "popularized and legitimized the notion that Africans had made a positive contribution to Brazil" (Needell 52). Freyre spent a few years in the U.S. starting in 1918, and as Gamio before him, completed his Master's degree under the supervision of Franz Boas (in 1921), before heading to Europe to visit Portugal, France and England and re-settle in Brazil in 1923 to rapidly become a highly influent social essayist and

mentor's approach. And I observe that if on certain matters Gamio disagreed with Boas (for instance on not disliking evolutionism's language, or on defending strong nationalistic views on forging mexicanness, which was probably not shared by an internationalist cosmopolitan such as Boas), he largely used a boasian framework in how he viewed culture.

¹⁹ In *Forjando Patria* Gamio writes eloquently: "innate inferiority that is ascribed to some groups does not exist. Deficiencies in aptitude are produced by historical, biological, and geographic cause; that is, by education and environment" (38).

²⁰ Certainly different from Boas's views on the inner pluralism of most given nationalities, Gamio for his part was arguing against 'artificial, hybrid, undesirable juxtaposition' and stressing instead 'evolutionary cultural fusion,' terms which Boas rarely used himself, writing for instance in *Forjando Patria*: "Indians gradually adopting new manifestations of culture by appropriating them to their own nature and necessities Fusion takes place with the wise interaction that comes with spontaneous evolution" (159).

writer, and hold political positions of rising importance in state administration as well as becoming a representative to the United Nations (Freyre's professional and intellectual biography is remarkably analyzed by Needell and Skidmore). After spending more time in the U.S. in the early 30s, Freyre is said by several commentators to have become highly sensitive to the issue of racial and cultural miscegenation as distinctive traits of Brazil.

In particular, and as he would write in what is regarded as manifestos on the social history of Brazil in *Casa Grande e Senzala* published in 1933 (translated as *The Masters and the Slaves* in 1946), as well as in *New World in the Tropics* (originally published in English under the title *Brazil: an Interpretation*, in 1945),²¹ racial segregation in the U.S. south and racial tensions in the country as a whole fascinated him to a point of becoming more aware of Brazil's sensed distinctiveness in dealing with racial issues. Eventually, he found that racial prejudice in his home country was not as pervasive as he observed it to be in the U.S., a reflection which led him to expand in his writing on the origins and forms of Brazil's hybrid identity: "the formation of Brazil went forward without the colonizer being concerned with racial unity or racial purity" (*The Masters and the Slaves* 40). While apologetic of what he termed as the Portuguese superior sense of adaptation, miscibility or mobility in 'tropical America' (over less adaptable Anglo-Saxons or 'turbulent' Spaniards in the rest of the continent), Freyre never went to the extreme of arguing that they were in any way culturally or racially superior to the Indian women and the African female slaves they took by choice or force. In fact, he almost reversed the matter: because of the Portuguese's own profoundly mixed ancestry from sources such as Phoenician, Celt, Goths, Gaul, Moorish, Roman, Jew or Teutonic, he was only 'Semi-European,' and as a result he had a "singular predisposition to the hybrid" while knowing "that a brown people may be superior to a white people" (*New World in the Tropics* 4, 56).

²¹ *Casa Grande*, as most Freyre's writing, combined literary exaltation (Freyre preferred to consider himself a writer and not a scholar, as particularly highlighted by Skidmore 2002) with extensive research in an array of disciplines (Freyre refused to be assigned to one discipline) mostly in the U.S. and in Portuguese archives, compiling pretty much all that had been published at the time on Brazil's history: "*Casa-Grande* probably drew on all the then-published historical writing on Brazil in Portuguese, English, and French, as well as on comparative medical and anatomical studies, travel literature, ethnographies of different parts of Africa, and published colonial reports, plus a sprinkling of quasi-ethnographic personal reminiscence" (Lehman 208). One can read Latin Americanist historian Skidmore for a systematic critique of Freyre's 'disorganised approach' and a sharp synthesis of *Casa Grande*'s main arguments (being: "modern Brazil as indelibly marked by the legacy of the slave-plantation complex"; the Portuguese being "uniquely suited to colonise the New world"; and "slavery in Brazil was more benign than elsewhere in the Western hemisphere, especially North America" with the supportive argument that race relations were hence more harmonious in Brazil [10-13]).

Mixedness and not purity, was what exalted Freyre for Brazil, and in doing so, he as well was careful not to rank white over dark, for he was convinced that from the start, Portuguese drew from too many cultural influences and racial origins to even qualify as white.

More generally, and as proposed by Dayton (43), *Casa Grande*, and by extension, Freyre's work, can be read as a "defense of the New World against the contempt of the Old."²² Willingly sharing a boasian egalitarian view on cultures (which he perhaps lyrically exaggerates in a Lamarckian perspective)²³ and changeability (termed 'miscibility' and 'mobility' in his language), Freyre views rather favorably ethnic mixing in the Brazilian context as a transformative dynamic through which mestizo offsprings ameliorated their best parental attributes and aptitudes. He in fact tended to consider race not as given biological or psycho-social characteristics, but as long-term product of ecological, climatic, economic adaptations, and physical type of changeable, enhanceable nature, where the Brazilian mestizo (especially of African ancestry) was seen as an even better type under development: a "more adaptable to tropical climate," "vigorous and ductile mestizo population" constituting altogether the "finest expressions of vigor and physical beauty" (*The Masters and the Slaves* 18, 45, 66). The New World, in sum, offered an alternative view, at times idealized, to European standards on viewing culture and race in the full-fledged heterogeneity and mixedness, characteristic of the national societies of the Americas.

Highly similar to the social history of Brazil presented by Freyre through the central role of racial and cultural mixing, Fernando Ortiz offered in *Contrapunteo del tabacco y del azucar* (1940, translated in English as *Cuban Counterpoint* in 1947) an alternative socio-economic historical account of the development of Cuba which was to become very influential in the literature on Latin America. Ortiz, an anthropologist trained in Spain and versed in positivist, evolutionary criminology until the publication of *Contrapunteo*, has for his part, never referred to the work of Franz Boas as much as that of his late career rival Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942)—about whom he however repeatedly stated that he did not share his functionalist approach. Ortiz is as well known to have been in close professional contact with peers trained by Boas, among them Melville Herskovits

²² One need to be reminded, as does Dayton of the overt repugnance expressed by writer and aristocrat J.A. Gobineau (ambassador to Brazil) or botanist and geologist L. Agassiz on Brazil during their trips to the country, respectively describing the country with a "population totally mulatto, vitiated in its blood and spirit, and fearfully ugly," or where "the amalgamation of races ... is rapidly effacing the best qualities of the white man, the Negro, and the Indian, leaving a mongrel non-descript type" (43).

²³ For a fine diagnostic of Freyre's main intellectual influences from many sources (considering himself a writer more than a scholar, he refused to be ascribed to one discipline), including the rejection of scientific racism by nationalist intellectual Manuel Bonfim, cf. Skidmore (12–17).

(1895–1963) who pioneered studies on the historical diffusion of West African heritage in the New World,²⁴ while his more direct relationship to Latin American alleged boasians such as Gamio or Freyre are nowhere significantly documented. Yet, comparable to the work of Gamio or Freyre, Ortiz's *Contrapunteo* essentially consisted of a project on defining the cultural identity of his country (and by extension, the continent) in terms of breaking with racist and evolutionist theories, and allowing for non-purist views of culture and race emphasizing instead a disbelief in European alleged superior culture, with an interest for the plasticity of cultures, their interconnectedness, and for distinguishing race from culture.

Cuban Counterpoint is mostly an essay about the social history of the island through the export-led development of the cane and the tobacco industries since the founding of the colony; the progressive adoption and transformation of sugar and tobacco consumption habits in the island and in Europe; and the parallel forming of a Cuban identity made of borrowings, exchanges, impositions, reinterpretations and creative syntheses. Beyond the allegoric metaphor of using sugar cane (an industry promoted by the Spaniards) and Cuban cigar smoking (an indigenous habit soon to be adopted by African slaves and white Spaniard colonists before becoming one of the island's finest products of export), the book offered Ortiz the occasion to show that cultural encounters between populations of differing backgrounds did not invariably lead to 'acculturation' processes by which dominant groups absorbed or erased the culture of others, or processes favoring the idea that Europe was naturally propagating its cultural superiority via colonialism. Instead, he argued, while discrediting the idea that European culture was in any way 'superior,' something else was happening, cultural adoptions and adaptations being active processes by which mutual adjustments occurred. In exchange for (foreign-led) sugar industries to develop into cane plantations and distilled products, Cuba offered the world its tobacco, which from a ritualistic or medicinal indigenous use came to be viewed as a refined new luxury habit for European tastes. For Ortiz, cultural habits were transmutating, that is, they were never simply transmitted or imposed from one group to the other. They were more often than not transformed and appropriated on new terms as they grew more interconnected: hence, 'transculturation' and not acculturation was what was happening.

Cuban culture was itself the product of the transculturation of successive waves of Indian, Iberian and African people themselves from a variety of cultures,

²⁴ Together with several colleagues from the hemisphere such as Melville Herskovits, Alan Locke, Gonzalo Aguirre-Beltran, or Arthur Ramos, Fernando Ortiz was to establish an International Institute for Afro-American Studies in Mexico in 1943, which activities remain to be documented. Herskovits for his part created in 1947 the first (Carnegie Corporation) funded African studies program in Northwestern university. On his career and influence, cf. Apter; Jackson; Yelvington).

who had come to ‘fusion’ into a progressively emerging ‘national whole’ (Ortiz). In these terms, Ortiz proposed to view Cuba’s history and more generally that of the continent, as the “history of its intermeshed transculturations” (Coronil xxv), meaning the forming of new cultural identities through the continuous mixing, borrowing, creating and conflicting encounters of people of highly heterogeneous backgrounds. Lastly, not only did Ortiz view cultures as changeable and interconnectable, he as well shared a boasian inclination for treating culture and race as separate concepts. Explaining his preference for the use of the term ‘culture’ over that of ‘race,’ Ortiz writes years after the publication of *Contrapunteo*: “Certainly, culture does not signify what race signifies. The former is a human classification based on typical means of life, a social behavior; the latter is an attempt at a morphological and physical classification. Culture is an essentially human and sociological concept; race is of an exclusive zoological nature” (Ortiz 401–402; ‘El Engano de las razas,’ qtd by Catoira [184–85]).

Conclusion

The preceding pages highlight the remarkable coincidences between the views of influential Latin American intellectuals, and those of Franz Boas in the first half of the twentieth century, who at the publication of *Forjando Patria* (1916) and *Casa Grande* (1933) was at the peak of his career, while in his decline against Malinowskian functionalism when *Cuban Counterpoint* (1940) came out. All the authors discussed here were shown to share a similar perspective about confronting racism and giving new value to Indian, African and mixed race populations which were often viewed with contempt in European eyes. Moreover, they all held a liberal commitment for egalitarianism and relativism, resisting ideas prevailing in their time about the unquestionable superiority of any culture or race over others. They also joined in distinguishing culture from race and evolutionary biology, as well as on using history for explaining cultural and social change. And lastly, they all favorably viewed racial and cultural mixing and interconnectedness as some of the most promising features of New World societies. All of these elements could arguably be situated within a perspective on culture that is transamerican, that is to say a distinctive approach to conceptualizing culture on terms specific to the varied experience of American societies with ethnic and cultural heterogeneity as foundational traits.

Boas’s direct or indirect influence on the work of Manuel Gamio, Gilberto Freyre or Fernando Ortiz cannot be fully established. What can be done is to sketch some of the areas where their works have intersected. In all the areas which were summarized in the preceding pages, there, of course, remain many conceptual or political spaces that do not fully coincide. Among these, Boas never spoke of inter-racial mixing as a form of progressive whitening, an approach which critics have paired with the mestizofilia of some Latin American

intellectuals and state-led policies. Although an assimilationist himself (in the sense of opposing any form of segregationism), he did not either spend his production on explaining the programmatic impact that anthropologists could have with orienting state policies. He believed in scientific autonomy, and in the role of Scientists for challenging and questioning politics. He did not view positively the possibility for Scientists to serve politics, or in applied anthropology serving state purposes. And last but not least, Boas's cosmopolitanism²⁵ probably established a natural distance with many of his students seeking to use some of his approach for nationalistic purposes, or in the building of a sense of national cultural identity, as seemed to be the case with Gamio, Freyre, and perhaps Ortiz.

The work and influence of Franz Boas on reconceptualizing culture in non-racially essentializing terms allowing to capture diversity, connectedness and change, as well as that of Latin American intellectuals who have in a rather proximate spirit argued for comparable issues of 'fusion' and 'hybridity' from the standpoint of Mexican, Brazilian or Cuban experiences with building a distinctive sense of cultural identity, can, in final analysis, be viewed as pioneering steps towards the emergence of a transcultural framework. Such a framework, which others and I have defined elsewhere ("Multiculturalism, Interculturality, Transculturality"; "Multiculturalisme dense"; Côté/ Benessaïeh; Imbert; Welsch), allows one to view cultural interactions in their transformative dimensions, arguing mostly that beyond unavoidable conflict or mere lukewarm coexistence, and away from European fictions of national homogeneity, pluricultural societies' inner dynamics such as those of the New world can and should be conceptualized otherwise.

Such reconceptualizations of culture based on experiences specific to the Americas can also be linked to the emergence of theory and policy frameworks of multiculturalist orientations. In effect, Boas's interventions on culture and race tended to be labeled in the very same terms with which multiculturalism as a perspective was to be defined several decades after him, following the reversal of racial profiling in the immigration policies of the U.S. and Canada in the sixties. His belief in the equality of individuals no matter their cultural backgrounds or their degree of racial purity or mixedness, his consistent skepticism about white superiority, his life-long struggle for non-discrimination, and his pluralist insistence on giving value and recognition to cultures in their own terms, can all be seen as significant landmarks towards the forming of liberal rights-based conceptions of diversity in contemporary society mostly associated with multiculturalist perspectives. More generally so, Boas's work and legacy can

²⁵ Boas despised so much all forms of nationalism, for him a mere form of tribalism, that he was to write that: "it is clear that the term 'race' is only a disguise of the idea of nationality, which has really very, very little to do with racial descent; and that the passions that have been let loose are those of national enmities, not of racial antipathies" ("Race and Nationality" 8, qtd by Liss 141).

perhaps be seen as only illustrative of an effervescent intellectual, internationalist, climate of liberal orientation marking the social sciences in the New world of the early twentieth century; a climate in which new conceptions of modern society more favorable to mixedness and diversity were to gain importance, and where the articulation of ideas on *mestizaje* in Latin America and multiculturalism in North America could very well be contextualized.

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